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## 48 Ways - 004 Building Yourself Through Torah

### ***“Binah” - A Usage of The Word “Binyan”\Structure***

The *Mishnah* lists 48 *kinyanim* (ways of acquisition) to acquire the Torah. Just like you need to make a “*kinyan*” to acquire an item in order for it to be yours, so must you “acquire” the Torah which Hashem gave you. If you have to acquire something physically with a “*kinyan*” for it to be yours, surely something spiritual needs to be acquired with a “*kinyan*”.

Let us try to understand one of these *kinyanim*; the *sefarim hakedoshim* state that through any one of these 48 *kinyanim*, you can acquire the whole Torah.

The fourth *kinyan* mentioned in the list of the 48 *kinyanim* in the *Mishnah* is called “*binas halev*” - “understanding of the heart”. The word “*binah*” comes from the word *binyan*, to build. “*Binas halev*” is thus essentially to “build” the heart; let us explain this matter.

### ***Enthusiasm Doesn't Build You***

When a person gets married, he is happy. For how long is he happy for? Not for long. That feeling of happiness you had when you first got married never lasts - it doesn't build you. Marriage might help you build your home to have a “*bayis neeman b'yisrael*” - but it doesn't automatically build your soul.

In fact, all kinds of happiness that you know of never “build” you into a person. On Yom Tov we are happy as well, as we are commanded by the Torah to rejoice each Yom Tov - but this happiness does not last for the rest of the year. Happiness is a kind of enthusiasm, and enthusiasm does not build you, because enthusiasm doesn't last. Inspiration comes and goes.

In order to acquire the Torah, do we mainly need enthusiasm, or do we need the opposite of enthusiasm - to be **calm** for it? Enthusiasm is a kind of excitement, whereas being calm is not excitement; it is just to be calm, without any “excitement” involved. These are two different forces in our soul: enthusiasm (in Hebrew, “*hislahatus*”), and calmness (*menuchah*).

When we all said “*Naaseh v'nishmah*” (“We will do and we will hear”), did we do so out of enthusiasm, or out of calmness? If a superficial person reads the part of the Torah in which we accepted the Torah, he probably thinks that we did so out of “enthusiasm”, in the same way someone rushes into a certain endeavor without thinking, because he's so excited. We all know that excitement dies down eventually. When people go into decisions with excitement and enthusiasm, after some time the enthusiasm goes away, and then the person regrets if afterwards.

In today's generation, there is an unfortunate phenomenon taking place, in which people sign a divorce agreement before they get married – why? Just in case the marriage doesn't work out and they have to get divorced, all financial matters will be worked out beforehand. Why do people make such stipulations to begin with? It is because the mentality of such people is to get married out of excitement, and they know good and well that excitement doesn't last. They are therefore prepared for a divorce long beforehand, because deep down they know that a marriage cannot survive based on how excited you are about your spouse.

This is also why *kaballos* (resolutions) that people make on Rosh HaShanah usually don't last. Often these resolutions to improve were made from excitement, and not from calmness. Decisions made of excitement eventually lose their excitement and thus they don't last.

If so, why will accepting the Torah on Shavuot last for us for the rest of the year? Why do we accept the Torah on Shavuot – why should it be different than any other resolution we make that usually doesn't last?

To know the answer, let us explain the following.

### ***Torah Is Life!***

Imagine if a non-Jew wants to convert, but he says, "If Judaism works out for me, then I'll stay, and if not, I'll go back to my old ways." But then it will be too late to go back, because he is still a Jew. You can't convert to Judaism based on conditions.

We know that a person can marry a woman based on a condition; if he tells her "You are betrothed to me based on such and such a condition", the marriage is valid according to the Torah only if the conditions are fulfilled.

Why is it that a person can't decide also that he will separate himself from the Torah if it doesn't work out for him? How were we able to say "*Naaseh V'Nishmah*"? The generation who left Egypt were given a choice to accept the Torah or not. Why couldn't they just say, "If the Torah works out for us, we accept it, but if not, we are not accepting it, retroactively." Why couldn't they make this condition?

The answer is because the Torah is called *Toras Chaim*, a "Torah of life". The Torah is life itself! Something which is life itself is something which you can't decide if you will separate from it or not if, even if it's hard. You can't separate yourself from something that is life itself. Every person wants to live, because that is the way people are.

Standing at Har Sinai, the Maharal writes, was when everyone understood clearly the recognition that without Torah, life is like death. It's not a "punishment" if you don't have the Torah – it's an absence of life. A person without the Torah in his life might seem to be physically alive, but inside himself, he is dead.

Thus, although we were not commanded to accept the Torah and we had a choice, we still couldn't separate from it, because Torah is life. We drink water not because we choose to, but because we need it to stay alive, and we do it automatically without thinking too hard about it. When something is life to us, it doesn't make a difference if we are commanded to do it or not; we just do it, and we don't think about it. That is why we said "*Naaseh V'Nishmah*".

So we were very calm when we said *Naaseh V'Nishmah* and accepted the Torah – we didn't rush into this decision; we were utterly calm when we made it, because we recognized that we need it for our life.

When people are searching for Torah in their life, they feel like they are thirsting for life itself. They are thirsty for Torah no less than someone who is thirsty for water. They understand that Torah itself is life, and thus they yearn for it and thirst for it.

Even if someone would be told that he won't be punished in Gehinnom if he doesn't learn Torah and do the *mitzvos*, what would life look like if he wouldn't keep the Torah? Such a life, even if he never gets punished in Gehinnom, would still not be a life at all.

### ***Body and Soul Together***

Can a person live life without any inner meaning? Can he sleep well at night if there is no Torah in his life? If a person is not bothered by the lack of Torah in his life, it shows that he's not aware of his soul's desire for life.

We have a body in us and a soul in us. Our soul is an inner voice in us that tells us what the right thing is; when people don't hear their inner voice calling out to them, they ignore their soul, and instead live a life of the body.

(Of course, we are not saying that we must only focus on our spiritual needs and come to neglect our physical needs of our body. We should not ignore our body. Only Moshe Rabbeinu sanctified his body so much that he was so unaffected by the body's desires, but we are not Moshe Rabbeinu's level.)

If we know that we can't silence the body's desires, is it possible to silence the soul's desires? It is really impossible to silence the soul's desires. It is impossible to silence either the body or the soul. If someone tries to totally ignore either his body or soul, he is suffering internally. Chazal say that "the wicked are full of regrets", and the depth behind this statement is because the wicked ignore the voice of their soul and continue to sin, despite their regrets.

Why do we really want the Torah? Is it because otherwise we will get punished?! Such an answer is not the kind of attitude that they had at Har Sinai. If someone doesn't have the attitude that our ancestors had as they stood at Har Sinai, he is disconnected from the event of standing at Sinai, and he won't be able to receive the Torah anew each year when Shavuot comes. At Har Sinai, they accepted the Torah because they listened to the voice of the soul inside them, which demanded Torah in order to live.

To accept the Torah is to essentially realize your soul's desire! We could not be forced to accept the Torah, because that would suffocate our body. But neither could we say "*Naaseh V'Nishmah*" impulsively, because that would have been ignoring the body. We need body and soul involved in order to have Torah. We have to listen to our soul's desire, but we must not totally ignore our body either; we need both our body and soul involved in order to calmly accept the Torah.

### ***Aspirations Cannot Build You***

Therefore, even when a person feels very enthusiastic to reach high levels in *Avodas Hashem* (service towards G-d), this alone will not help him be successful. A person needs to give **structure** to his *Avodas Hashem*. We can see this from the "ladder of growth" described in *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*: to begin with Torah, then to attain *zerizus* (alacrity), then *zehirus* (watchfulness), etc.

A person needs a sort of "ground" to stand up on in order to serve Hashem; he needs to have a solid and firm basis to stand upon before he places a ladder on it to ascend heavenward. You can't place a ladder anywhere unless you have ground to put it on.

The "ground" of the ladder is Torah. If you have a solid basis Torah in your life, you can place your

ladder of growth on it - and only after that can you begin to climb all the levels of *Avodas Hashem*.

### **Only the Torah Builds You**

The Torah is our very life, our very existence. Let us try to explain how it is.

Let's say you have an author who wrote many *sefarim* or books. Is there a connection between all his books? Is each book built upon its predecessor? Sometimes you can find ideas that are consistently expressed throughout an author's books, but there is usually no structure to all of his ideas. The books are not built upon each other; they are just random pieces of knowledge.

Torah, throughout all the generations, is not like that. It is constantly being built and developed based on whatever was known to the previous generations. There was first the *Aseres Hadibros* (the Ten Commandments), and then there was the rest of the *Chumash*, which was built upon that. Then came *Mishnayos* (Mishnah) which is built upon *Chumash*. *Gemara* (Talmud) is based on *Mishnayos*, and the words of the *Geonim* (scholars who lived a bit after the Talmud) are built upon the *Gemara*. The words of the *Rishonim* (early sages) are based on the words of the *Geonim*, and the words of the *Acharonim* (late sages) are built upon the *Rishonim*.

You can't write a *sefer* on Tractate *Zevachim*<sup>[1]</sup> even if you learned it very well, if you haven't learned *Chumash*, *Mishnah*, or *Gemara*, which came before it -- because there will be nothing for your ideas to be built upon.

The question is: Is your own soul built as well? We know that the words of Torah we learn are built upon the previous generations, but what about your own soul when it comes to learning the Torah? Are you building your soul as well through learning Torah?

### **A Life That Lacks Structure**

Let's say a person discovers *sefer Mesillas Yesharim* one day, and he sees that it's a wonderful *sefer*, so he decides to spend his whole day learning it. Is there anything wrong with this? We know that there is reward for every word of Torah learned. If a person learns one word of *Targum Onkelos* the whole day, he gets reward for it. So why can't a person do this all day? What's wrong with this?

The answer is simple: because a person needs to truly **build** himself. If a person learns *Mesillas Yesharim* all day, it shows that he isn't built enough in his own life - and that is the reason why he's learning a *sefer* like *Mesillas Yesharim* all day. Did the author of *Mesillas Yesharim* himself [the Ramchal] sit and learn *sefer Mesillas Yesharim* all day? No, because he had built himself.

Can a person just learn a few *sefarim* and then write his own *sefer* from all that knowledge he sees? No, because he isn't built enough properly. If someone doesn't learn Torah in a way that builds him, he is not a true *Talmid Chochom* (Torah scholar). Torah has to build you; it has to be learned in the proper, structured way. It develops a person only when it is learned in a structured way.

Without being properly built, a person lacks stability in his life.

### **Real Questions Vs. Fake Questions**

The stability we need in our life can only be Torah. But, we must know something important as well about this.

If a person learns a few words of *Gemara*, is that enough to build him?

A first grader doesn't understand the meaning of the word *Beraishis*. He knows that the word is made up of six letters, but if you ask him what it means, he will look at you like, "What do you want from me?" Yet there are adults also who don't really understand one word of Gemara they learn.

When a person asks a question on the Gemara, there are two kinds of questions one can have. One kind of question is a "good question". But other times a person has a question and he discovers that that it's not really a question - it's just that he didn't know how to read the words properly in the first place.

One time someone came to me and asked me why he feels so unsuccessful in his learning. He told me that every time he asks a question on what he's learning, he discovers afterwards that it's never really a question; he asked me why this always happens to him.

I told him, "When you read a line of Gemara, just read the words. Don't think so much - just simply **read** what it says there."

Why am I telling you this story? It is because we have to understand that learning Torah has two parts to it. There is the actual exertion we put into it - *hasmadah* (diligence) and *yegiah* (effort). But this alone doesn't build you in life. If someone goes to *Daf Yomi* every day, it's a wonderful thing, but this alone will not build you! But if you try to understand what you learn and you analyze it in-depth, it is then that learning the Gemara will be able to properly build you.

If a person learns *Mussar*<sup>[2]</sup> or *Chassidus*<sup>[3]</sup> all day (or if he reads all day "*Shirei Kodesh*", holy poems composed throughout the generations) and he neglects the study of Gemara in-depth, and he's very happy in his life with this kind of learning, what is he missing? He is missing a properly built kind of life. There is no *binyan* (structure) to his life.

What's the difference between an adult who learns Torah and a child who is beginning to learn Chumash? Is it that an adult understands something a little better than a child does? That is not the difference. The difference is because an adult is supposed to really think into what he learns.

### **Yeshiva Has To Build You**

This is *binah* ("understanding") - is to think into something, to reflect on something and to produce information from how you think.

Chazal say that "women are blessed with extra *binah*"; the deep explanation of this matter is that just as women give birth and produce a soul, they are able to give birth as well to new thoughts. This is the quality known as "*binah*". The words *binah* (understanding) and *binyan* (structure) are related; if you think into things and reflect, you have "*binah*" - and you will come to have a "*binyan*".

What is holding you up in your life? Some people are being held up by the fact that they learn in Yeshiva; they thrive on "being in Yeshiva". But anyone who is still in Yeshiva really can't know where he's holding in his life, and if he is really being held up by it. If a person is surviving in his life only because of Yeshiva, can that build you for life? The whole point of Yeshiva is to give you a structure in life that will build you for the rest of your life. If you don't have that, then the fact that you're in Yeshiva alone will not be enough for you to hold onto stability for the rest of your life.

The stability we need in life is something that will build us for the rest of our life. Just to rely on Yeshiva to build us will not be enough for us to have a lasting stability for life.

We have all gone through much in life, and life is still ahead of us, including our marriage and children. How are we to survive life? We need to be built properly so that we can go through life in the

proper way and have something to always hold onto when we go through difficulty.

What can give us that stability? That stability is only the Torah that you learn. The words here alone cannot express enough this. If you have the Torah always in your life, you will be able to survive whatever you go through in life.

What is the lesson for life that you must take out from learning in Yeshiva? The *mitzvos* we do and the *zechus* we have now to sit and learn is not enough for our life, even though this is wonderful and commendable. What we must take out of Yeshiva is to learn how we build ourselves.

And how do we build ourselves? It will not happen if we learn superficially without understanding what we are learning. We have to make sure we are understanding what we are learning.

If we have understanding in our learning, we will have *binah*, and if we have “*binah*”, we will have “*binyan*” – we will be able to ‘build’ ourselves for the rest of our life from our learning.

### ***Doubts and Confusion***

Look around and see what’s going on in the world. The world is full of so many distractions. There are so many desires that people have, and that is one kind of distraction in life. But there is another kind of distraction that people have – the doubts and confusion that we have in regards to how we can serve Hashem. If we don’t have the stability of Torah, then our life will be very confusing and we will always feel lost.

One time one of my students came to me and said that he is very frustrated and unhappy in his life. I said to him, “What’s going on?”

He said, “I have all kinds of doubts going on.”

I said to him, “*Nu*, we all have doubts. Maybe we can sit and try to figure out how to get rid of what you’re doubtful about.”

He said to me something very surprising: “In the morning, I’m not sure if I should first go eat breakfast, or if I should first go the supermarket.”

I didn’t understand what the problem was. I said to him, “That’s your whole problem?”

He said to me, “Because I’m not sure about this, I think about it the whole day, and therefore I can’t enjoy my whole day.”

When I heard this, I realized that there are people who have developed severe emotional issues when it comes to being doubtful: because of one constant nagging doubt, a person can be doubtful the entire day just about one little thing he’s not sure about, and he can hem and haw over it forever. It is then that I realized how bad being doubtful can get: there are doubts that a person can have which don’t make any sense whatsoever, yet it plagues the person the entire day and doesn’t let him concentrate and learn!

A person isn’t sure if he should buy a certain apartment, and he can’t decide. Sometimes it’s really hard to come to a decision about these things. But at least a person has options to consider over here; it is a kind of doubt which makes sense. But there are kinds of doubts people can have which don’t make any sense.

These are doubts which result from a lack of stability (“*yetzivut*”) in one’s life.

When a person is not religious and he's thinking about becoming *frum*, he is often doubtful about if he should take the plunge or not. But someone who's already *frum* is much less likely to doubt *Yiddishkeit*, because he feels stable and secure in his life. This shows us how the power of stability (*yetzivut*) can keep us anchored, even as we go through hardship.

We all go through countless difficult situations in life. How are we to survive them? How can we acquire an ability to take care of all the doubts we encounter in our life? There are people who become *frum* and they keep switching their *Chassidus* all the time. One day the person is a Gerrer, and the next day he is a Bresslover. Why do people become so full of doubt in their life? How can a person find himself? What will give a person stability in his life?

If a person doesn't have what to hold onto, he is wandering around in his life very confused. He hears some inspiration here and there every once in a while, but that's it, and he's just back to the confusion afterwards. He never builds himself.

Of course, when a person learns Torah, he can also have doubts in his learning, but it's a different kind of a doubt. It's not a detrimental kind of doubt, because his soul has been built.

### ***It's Not Enough To Hear These Words...***

Do you understand what I am trying to tell from all of this? I am trying to tell you something that is true, but you need to actually overcome the problem I am describing, and experience it for yourself in your own life.

Chazal say that a person doesn't understand the words of his teacher until after forty years. Why does it take forty years? Rav Chaim Volozhiner said that his teacher, the Vilna Gaon, went into personal exile. After he returned, he regretted it. Rav Chaim Volozhiner asked him if he can go into exile as well. The Vilna Gaon answered him, "I did it and I regretted it." Rav Chaim Volozhiner said, "I want to do it also and then regret it."

This is a very deep answer. He was saying that he wanted to experience the matter for himself - it wasn't enough that he knew about it in his mind.

### ***Thinking Into Our Learning***

The only thing that can build you in life is this quality in the Mishnah called "*binas halev*" - "building" your heart. What does this really mean? It means to think into things as you are learning the Torah, to think about what you are learning. This helps you understand your learning, and in turn, it builds you.

This is not when you read something in the *Gemara* and you quickly decide, "Ah, I understand it." It is to really *think* into what you learn, as you learn.

### ***Don't Be Dependent On Your Surroundings***

How dependent are we on outside factors of the world? We are all affected by the world; we are not angels. But the question is, how much do we depend on our surroundings for support?

If we build ourselves up properly through learning the Torah and trying to understand what we learn, we will have the stability for life. If not, we are dependent on other things for survival.

To give an example, a person has a friend who he is very close to, and they are both learning in Yeshiva together. One day, his friend gets engaged. He tells his friend happily, "I'm engaged!"

"Mazal Tov!" he answers – but deep down, he's cringing inside. He'd have to be an angel not to be. He's mixed with happiness and sadness inside. Why? Now that his friend is engaged, that means that his friend is moving out of his life – and he will be left all alone. If a person depends on others for survival, his whole stability in life comes from external factors that can fall away one day. When those factors fall away, a person falls apart. He doesn't really have stability in his life to keep him going. But if a person has a stability that comes from inside himself, he can survive life.

Of course, your friends can help you a lot in life. But don't base your life on your social surroundings. Friends come and go. One day a person is best friends with someone, and then someone new comes to yeshiva who makes the previous best friend seem uninteresting compared to the new one. It's not that the friendship is over; it is just the way people are. Friendships come and go; it's not personal. But the point is, you can't base your sense of stability in life from your friends.

Our life has to be truly based on learning Torah and thinking into what we learn.

### ***In Conclusion***

These are very simple words to anyone who has experienced these words. But they are words that must *build* us for the rest of our lives, or else they are just inspiration that comes and goes.

If we want to work on our *middos* and *davening*, this can only work if they have a firm basis – a life based on building ourselves through learning the Torah. It is not enough to simply *learn* the Torah; we have to *build* ourselves through it, by *thinking into the meaning* of what we learn as we learn, and in this way, we come to purify our souls through it.

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[1] [4] The laws in the Talmud dealing with sacrifices during the Temple era

[2] [5] Jewish books of self-discipline such as *Mesilas Yesharim*, *Shaarei Teshuvah*, *Chovos HaLevovos*, *Orchos Tzadikim*, etc.

[3] [6] Jewish works containing Hassidic thought, such as *Tanya*, *Meor Einayim*, *Kedushas Levi*, *Beer Mayim Chaim*, *Pri Tzaddik*, *Noam Elimelech*, *Imrei Pinchas*, *Pri HaAretz*, etc.

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